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ABSTRACT

Five demographic myths related to education pose dangers to educational planning and thinking. The first myth says the return of service personnel after World War II caused the baby boom. Actually the baby boom began in 1939 and was not related to service personnel. The second myth claims the Great Depression decreased the birth and fertility rates and the number of births. Actually the decreases all began well before the Depression. Myth number three says the number of U.S. births continues to decrease. In fact the birth rate and the number of births have increased markedly in the last five years. This myth is dangerous because it has helped decrease enrollment in teacher education and may cause future teacher shortages. The fourth myth asserts the burden of the dependent population is high now. Actually it is unusually small, but it will increase after the year 2000. The last myth says that half or more of the children 18 and under live in one-parent families. In fact the figure is 22 percent, up from 12 percent in 1970. Basing programs on this myth could hurt school materials preparation, behavior counseling, and other educational activities. (Author/RW)

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DEMOGRAPHY IN THE UNITED STATES:

SOME TWENTIETH CENTURY MYTHS

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Demography in the United States: Some Twentieth Century Myths

Robert L. Egbert

Small myths are easy to get started. Someone observes a phenomenon, misinterprets it, and reports the misinterpretation as fact. Especially if the person is viewed as being an authority, other people accept the misperception and quote it to their friends and acquaintances. A myth has been born.

Myths arise from observations; consequently, most of them have some factual base. Because they are unimportant, most myths die almost as quickly and easily as they are born. But some myths are hardy. They seem to live forever, confusing thinking and causing people to wonder about their own perceptions of the world. Especially persistent are myths that have a name attached to them. Even informed people are likely to assist in perpetuating such myths because the name is a shorthand way of describing a phenomenon or concept with sufficient accuracy to meet the needs of the moment.

All myths have some element of hazard associated with them because they introduce misinformation into a variety of thinking and planning processes. Some myths are downright dangerous in the manner in which they misshape thinking.

During the past few years educators have become increasingly interested in population trends. We have learned that our ability to perform effectively, indeed our very ability to survive, is dependent on our knowledge of changing demographic patterns. But as we have entered what are for us the uncharted waters of demography, we have discovered that, at the popular level, this field is as filled with myths and misinformation as any other, our own included.

Some myths of demography are primarily of historical interest; they no

longer have any particular impact on planning. Others actively interfere with planning that now is taking place in education and related fields Because of the dangers that these myths pose to our thinking and planning, I should like to review a few of them.

1. The return of service personnel following World War II created a Baby Boom. Perhaps the most popular and persistent of all United States demographic myths is that there was a rapid increase in the number of babies born in the United States beginning after World War II, i.e., a Post-World War II Baby Boom. For example, a Time magazine article of May 1979 says, "Now one in every three Americans are products of the population surge that began right after World War II and lasted until the mid 1960s." And in 1977 Newsweek proclaimed, "A prime force . . . is the postwar baby boom, an explosion of births lasting roughly from 1947 to 1957."

In fact, there was a rapid increase in the number of babies born after World War II, but this was simply a continuation of a "boom" that began in 1939, two years before we entered the war and that continued almost unabated during the war. (See Figure 1.)

The cynic may ask, "Who cares when the boom began; the important thing is that there was a boom." There are two reasons why it is important to understand when the rapid increase began. The first is that it helps in interpreting the nature of the increase and the causes for its occurrence. The return of service personnel after the War did not cause the rapid increase in births; it undoubtedly amplified the increase and ensured that it was sustained, but it did not cause it. The second reason why it is important to understand when the rapid increase began is that an inaccurate understanding of that fact can cause major misinterpretations of related trends and events.

We were attempting to understand social developments in relation to the "baby boom." So long as we assumed that the rapid increase in the number of

babies began in 1947, we had difficulty in rationalizing our hypothesis about youth behavior in the mid-1960s. When we studied the data instead of accepting the myth, our hypothesis became more tenable.

2. The Great Depression of the 1930s created a decrease in the birth rate, the fertility rate, and the number of babies born in the United States.

This is perhaps the second most popular of the past U.S. demographic myths. Economists have used the very low birth and fertility rates and number of births of the mid-thirties as evidence that a depressed economic condition has a negative impact on natality. In fact, there was a low point for all three of these indices in the depth of the depression, but all three began their slide long before the depression began. The fertility rate began to decrease as early as we have good figures--from 1910 forward; the birth rate began to drop at about the time of the first World War; and the number of births began to decline in the middle 1920s. All three trends reversed during the late 1930s but this may have been at least in part a social rather than a purely economic phenomenon.

Just as the low birth rate and numbers of the depression years cannot be explained by poor economic conditions in the U.S., neither can the decrease of the 1960s and 1970s, for throughout most of those years per capita personal consumption expenditure was growing.

3. The number of births in the United States is continuing to decrease.

Despite readily available data to the contrary, many writers for popular publications assume that the number of births in this country is still declining. For example, in 1979, American Education contained an article that said,

> Some reviewers of the NIE report (Declining Enrollments: The Challenge of the Coming Decades) highlighted the upbeat side of declining enrollment. They stressed that an increase in elementary school students would start in 1985 and that secondary school enrollment, following a 25 percent decline through 1990, would once again start to grow. Now it appears that any upbeat notion linked to declining enrollments deserves to be tempered because an upswing previously predicted for the late 1970s has yet to happen.

Although the U.S. fertility rate has remained relatively unchanged for some time, both the birth rate and the number of births have increased markedly over the past five years. From a low of 3,137M births in 1973, there was an increase to 3,598M in 1980. The birth rate went from 14.9 to 16.2 during this same period. If the fertility rate continues to be depressed, the number of births also will decrease once more as the number of women in the prime child bearing years drops off in the late 1980s and the 1990s. In the meantime, a continuation of even the present very low fertility rate should produce increasing numbers of births for about the next three to six years.

Unlike the first two myths, which now are primarily of historical interest, the myth of a continuing decrease in the number of births threatens to exacerbate problems that are being created by an over-reaction to the fifteen year decrease in number of births that took place between 1960 and the mid-1970s. From the standpoint of schools of education, perhaps the most apparent over-reaction to this actual decrease has been the decline in undergraduate interest and enrollment in teacher education. Though it required several years for this enrollment decline to occur, it now is on us with a vengeance. In several teaching fields there already is a shortage of teachers and a balance between supply and demand is approaching in most others. At the same time, expressed interest in teaching has plummeted to near the zero mark. Even under normal conditions, reversing this trend of disinterest would require several years. With various news media communicating that the number of births is either remaining low or continuing to drop, our task is made doubly difficult.

4. <u>The burden of a dependent population is unusually high at the present time</u>.

By the nature of their reports, various newspapers and magazines have given the impression that we have an unusually large dependent population, which

incidentally is getting larger. The fact is that we have an unusually small dependent population, ~~but it will soon begin to increase in size in a way that will be very difficult to cope with.~~

The Bureau of the Census reports a dependency ratio. This is the sum of the persons eighteen and younger plus those over sixty-four divided by the number of persons from nineteen to sixty-four, inclusive. Between 1970 and 1980, that ratio decreased from 79.1 to 64.2 (Brotman, 1981). Because the number of persons turning nineteen plus the number dying continues to be greater than the number being born plus the number turning sixty-five, the dependency ratio will become even more favorable for the next several years. Our present unusually favorable dependency ratio will not seriously reverse until after the turn of the century. In fact, even in the year 2000, the ratio is predicted to be 63.1. It is after that when the increasing number of people born after 1939 begin turning 65, ~~that the dependency ratio will begin advancing rapidly~~.

The problem with accepting this myth is that people are being led to believe that our situation is bad and will get worse. After all, how much worse can worse be. We're getting by now, so why worry. The fact is that our present dependency circumstance is almost ideal, ~~but it will become extremely difficult unless we change our planning and living patterns.~~ Because we have twenty years in which to prepare for the exaggerated dependency ratio that will develop, we still can make the necessary changes. We are unlikely to make those changes if we continue to perpetuate the myth that our situation already is bad.

5. Half or more of our children eighteen years and younger live in one parent families.

Between 1970 and 1980 the number of children eighteen and under living in one parent families almost doubled--from about twelve percent to about twenty-two percent. This is an enormous increase and it is a circumstance to which schools and other social institutions must devote more energy. However, contrary

to what some seem to believe, the one parent family is not the mode; it is not even close to being the mode.

There are several difficulties inherent in accepting this myth. Most of them have to do with programming--either for children and youth or for their parents. Child and youth programming problems may include materials preparation and purchase, behavior counseling, or the institution of school-associated child care. Parent programming would revolve primarily around schedule adjustments.

Obviously adjustments need to be made by schools and related social institutions to the changing family patterns. However, they should not behave as if the one parent family is the mode nor as if it is generally preferred in American society.

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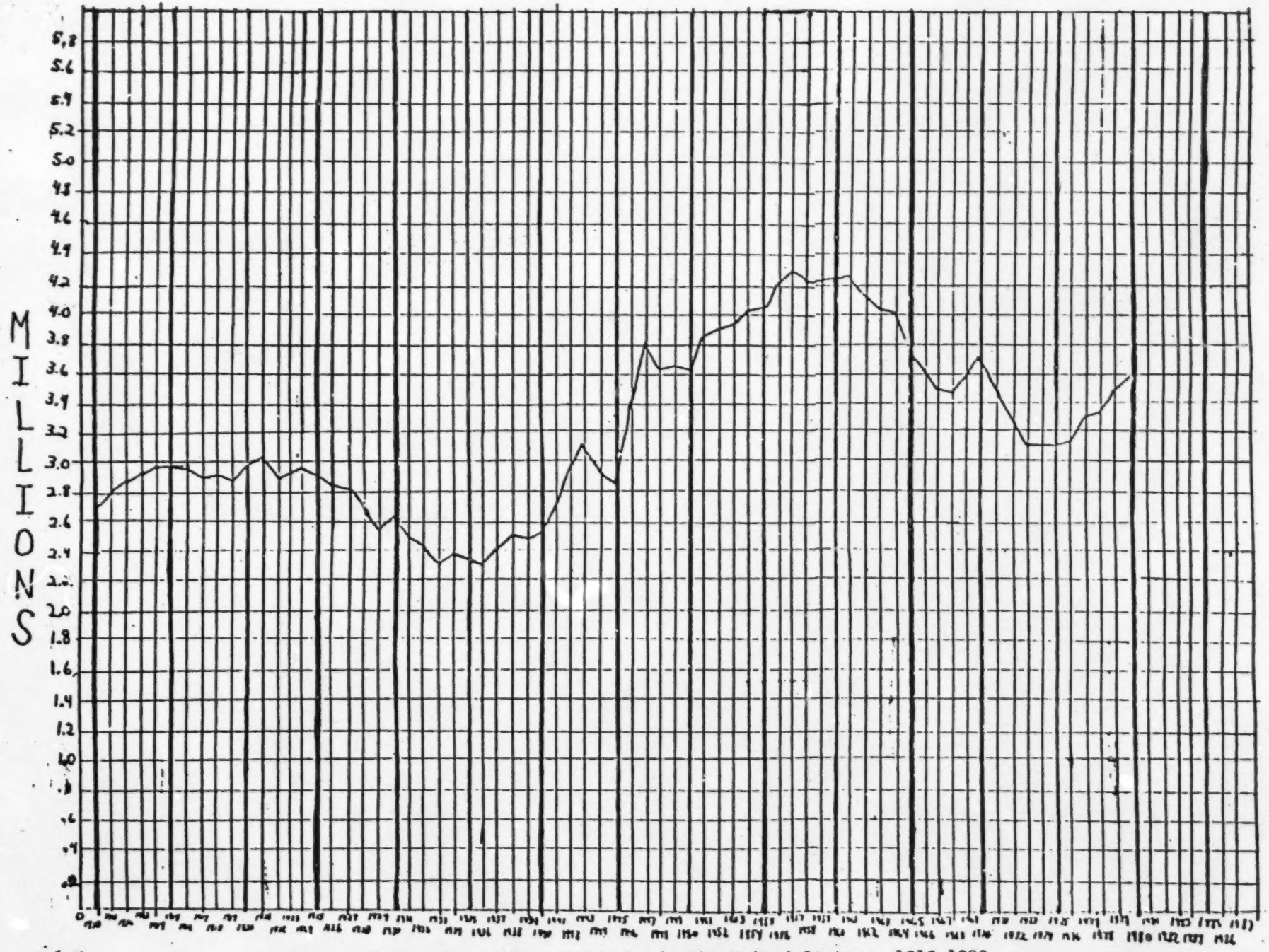

Figure 1. Number of Births in the United States: 1910-1980

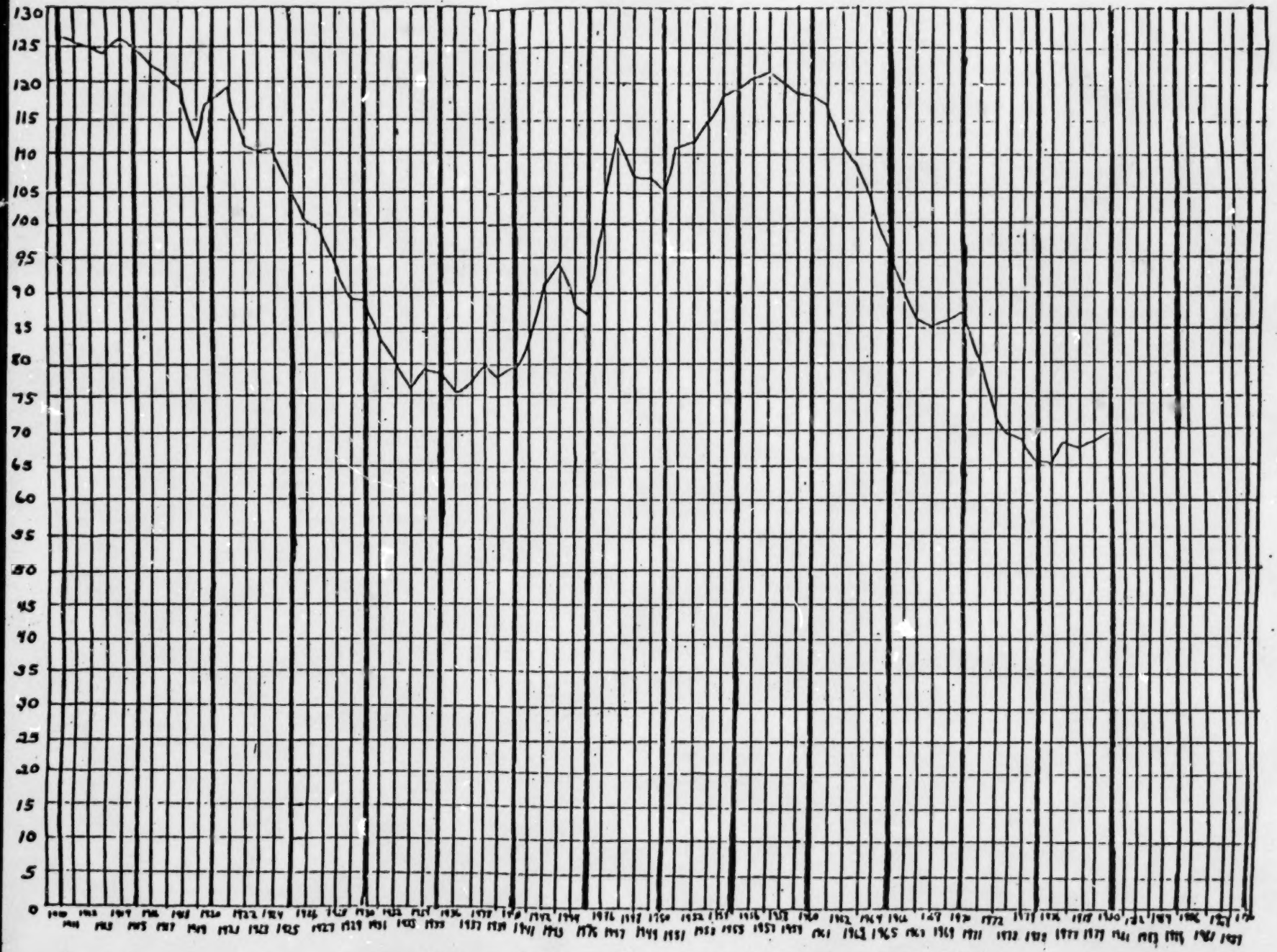

Figure 2. Fertility Rate in the United States: 1910-1980

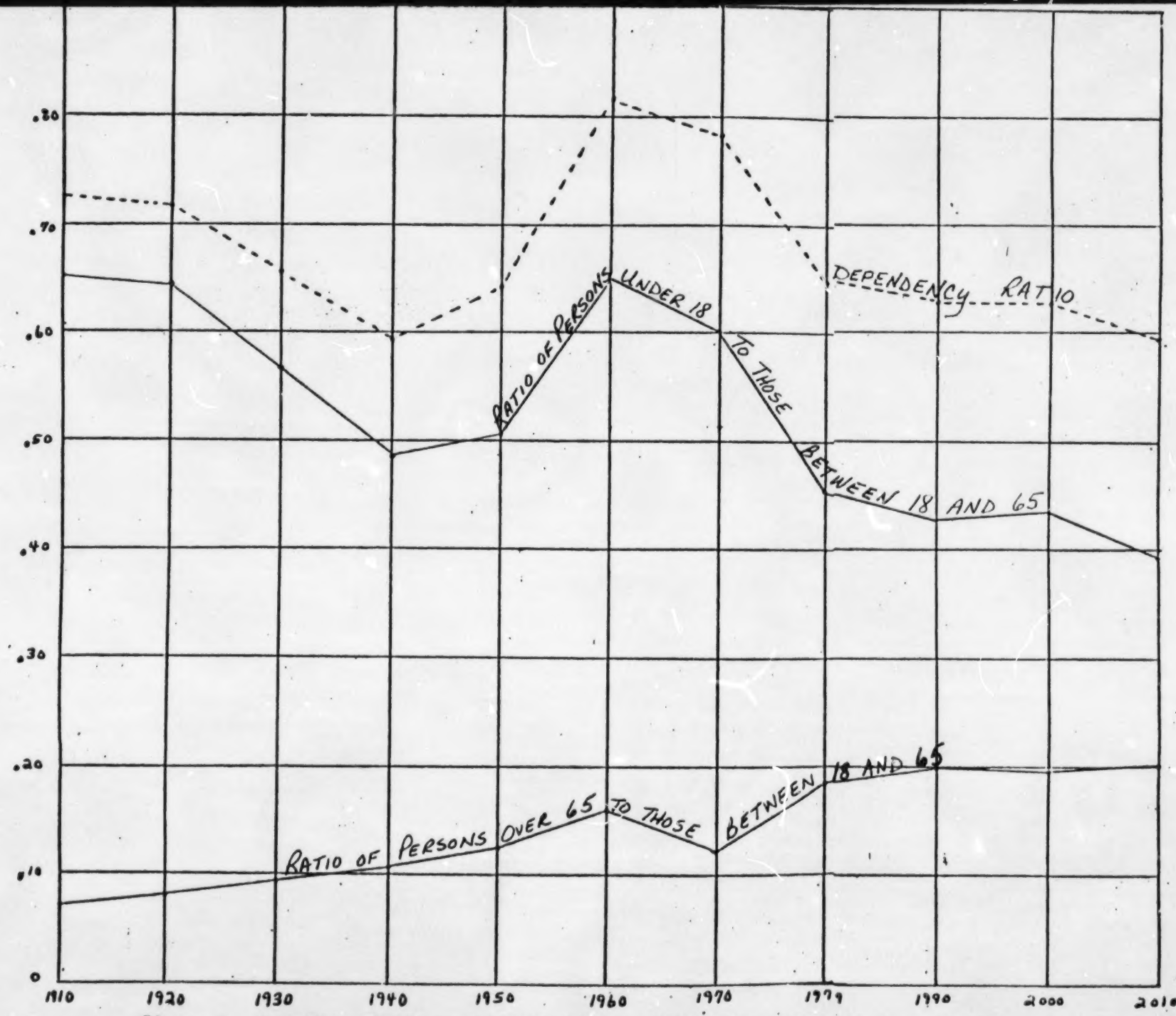

Figure 3. Dependency Ratio in the United States 1910-1979 with Projections to 2010